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Item 3 (a) of the provisional agenda*
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern, and further actions and initiatives; priority theme: "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges"

Statement submitted by National Alliance of Women's Organizations, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

The National Alliance of Women's Organizations is an umbrella group representing and supporting women's organizations and individual members based in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. With a focus on gender and Europe, the organization promotes gender equality and social justice, utilizing the internationally agreed human rights instruments for all women. The organization works alongside sister organizations as the UK Joint Committee on Women, the United Kingdom's national body representing the concerns and needs of women in the United Kingdom at the European Women's Lobby.

The priority theme of the fifty-sixth meeting of the Commission on the Status of Women, the empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges, is a major challenge facing those working for the advancement of women within both national and international contexts.

The organization believes that at the present juncture it is crucial to make access to services and justice more readily available at all levels. All women in rural areas face discrimination. Rural women are often the main "outsiders" of democratic community life and local development. Their role within those rural community contexts is often linked to the family life and care, in opposition to the role of men, which is linked to public life and work. Despite the contribution that rural women make to rural development in both developing and developed countries, rural women continue to be economically and socially disadvantaged because of their limited access to economic resources and opportunities, their exclusion from planning and decision-making and their disproportionate burden of unpaid care work.

In rural areas of the United Kingdom, many elderly women and widows of farmers, and of men who have retired from urban life and jobs, experience not only relative poverty but also the "non-income" poverty of isolation, loss of dignity and barriers to participation in community life owing to cuts in transport facilities and the closing of local shops and facilities such as post offices.

In developing countries, rural women suffer extreme poverty, especially rural widows, who often suffer violations of their human rights, such as their right to inheritance and ownership or use of land, or access to credit and extension services. They therefore have no food security. According to the charity Widows for Peace through Democracy, rural widows in Africa and South Asia are often at risk of being "chased off" from their homesteads on the death of their husbands, forced into prostitution and evicted from their villages or coerced into high-risk survival strategies in the towns. Furthermore, internally displaced and refugee rural widows in conflict-afflicted countries are generally the last to be rehabilitated and resettled and require intensive support in order to rebuild their lives and those of their dependants. The international community, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Governments must address these issues and ensure that rural widows can access support services in order to protect their human rights.

The organization calls upon the United Nations system in and through all its bodies and agencies to use its technical expertise to ensure that sex-disaggregated statistics are collected to enable gender impact assessments to be made for the issue

of rural women. Information gained must be made available to Governments so that steps may be taken to mitigate detrimental impacts.

The organization further calls upon Governments, both from the North and South, to listen to the problems facing rural women and develop and apply sustainable and robust mechanisms to improve rural women's positions.

The organization calls upon States parties, the United Nations and civil society to work together towards empowering women in a rural setting, increasing prosperity and providing greater opportunities.